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Participatory Geographies

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This collection of papers aims to reflect and stimulate debate on research in geography which employs participatory approaches. It is both a celebration of the arrival of participation in human geography and related disciplines, and a timely reminder that participation itself is inherently spatial: we suggest that geographers have major contributions to make to participatory theory, practice and change. Participatory approaches have been employed for several decades by researchers in geography and related disciplines. In the last few years there has been a surge of interest and wider application, so that participatory geographies have reached critical mass (see Breitbart 2003; Kesby et al 2005; Kindon 2005; Kindon et al. in preparation; Pain 2004; Participatory Geographies Working Group 2006). The emphasis has been on charting new methods, knowledges and social change outcomes, which are some of the distinctive benefits of participatory approaches.

Geographers have also begun to engage critically with wider debates about participation, so that there is now a diversification of intellectual dialogue which requires closer scrutiny (see for example Cahill 2004, 2007; Cameron and Gibson 2005; Kesby 2000, 2005; Kindon 2003; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Mohan 1999; Moser and McIlwaine 1999; Williams 2004). Surprisingly, however, the relations between participation, place and space have received little attention, and this theme issue begins to address this gap (see also Kindon and Pain 2006).

Participatory research describes a family of approaches wherein those conventionally 'researched' are directly involved in some or all stages of research, from problem definition through to dissemination and action (see Kesby et al 2005; Kindon 2005; Pain and Francis 2003). Ownership of the research is shared with participants, who negotiate processes with the academic researcher. The approaches emphasise social change as a potential valuable outcome of research. Thus participatory approaches have been heralded as offering potential for more emancipatory and empowering geographies with transformative development as their key objective. They are gaining in popularity in light of recently voiced concerns about the intellectual and practical limits of the cultural turn and the need to 'rematerialize' human geography (Lees 2002; Gregson 2003; Philo 2000), continuing debates over relevance (Beaumont et al 2005; Staeheli and Mitchell 2005; Imrie 2005), and the perceived failure of mainstream qualitative methodologies to affect change beyond the academy (Fuller and Kitchin 2004; Participatory Geographies Working Group 2005). In particular, critical, feminist and postcolonial social and environmental geographies are being strengthened by this new means of putting principles and politics into action, working with research partners outside the academy in ways which give equal weight to transformation and knowledge production (see for example Cahill 2004; Cameron and Gibson 2005; Kindon 2003; McIlwaine and Datta 2004; McIntyre 2000; Peake 2000).

Although they share some philosophical and ethical tenets, participatory geographies have no strongly formed shared identity. While participation is an intrinsically spatial practice, and the development of participatory approaches outside of geography has increasingly borrowed spatial terminology and concepts (see Kesby 2005 and his paper in this issue), there is still relatively little sense, inside and outside the

discipline, of what is distinctive about the ways that geographers do participation. As the papers that follow show, participation, space and place are mutually constitutive. Firstly, spatial strategies, concepts and methods form central features of participatory theory and practice. Secondly, participatory processes in turn influence and shape space. Thirdly, participation demands attention to scale: not only because it begins from a concern to prioritise local subjects and concerns and ground-up processes (Chambers 1983; Freire, Maguire 1987), but because its frameworks of understanding provide ways of relating local concerns to the global, the national and the personal (Cahill 2004). Its processes provide a means of connecting displaced events and causations at practical and ideological levels, and powerful tools with which to begin to address hierarchical and scalar theorising of social and spatial processes (see Marston et al 2005). Fourthly, several geographers have begun to describe space and place as contexts and settings for participatory research, which are fundamental to how it operates, practically and politically and to the shape of its outcomes. Fifthly, there are connections to be made between other recent areas of geographical theory and understandings of participation (Kendon and Pain 2006).

The papers which follow arose from the first session on participatory geographies held at the International Geographical Union conference in Glasgow in 2004¹. The contributors to this session reflected on varied projects in different parts of the world, highlighting common opportunities, challenges and tensions for participatory geographies, and new directions for theory, practice and action. They raised important questions about the implications of participatory approaches for the practice of human geography more widely, the production of disciplinary knowledge and the relation of geographers to power in research processes.

In Mike Kesby's paper the emphasis is on retheorising participation from a geographical perspective. He addresses the poststructuralist critiques, led most notably by Cooke and Kothari (2001), which critiqued participation as a fundamentally modernist and instrumentalist project, which entrenches rather than destabilises the traditional relations between researcher and researched. The increasing institutionalisation of participation within research and policy has produced some of the worst excesses of extractive practice. This critique has reverberated powerfully throughout the social sciences and become another reason for abandoning

or avoiding participation as too problematic. Geographers have been at the forefront of counter-responses (see Cameron and Gibson 2005; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Kesby 2005; Williams 2004), and here, Mike Kesby forwards a constructive and sensitive argument informed by his research experiences on HIV risk and young people in Zimbabwe. He seeks to reconcile participatory research and post-structuralist critiques, and provides a compelling counter-critique of recent theorisations of power, empowerment, agency and the spaces of participation. Rather than be scared off by the problematics raised by poststructuralism, or continue to produce tidy accounts of participation that fail to acknowledge its complex relationships to power, we might reach 'a more positive reconciliation', and 'deploy (carefully) the resources of participation in attempts to effect empowered human agency and facilitate socio-spatial change'.

Participatory research involves continually moving between local detail and wider theoretical questions (see Cahill 2004). In her paper, Ellie Jupp also takes on the issues of knowledge and empowerment, drawing directly on her field experiences of using participatory methods in research on public space with young people in the UK. She gives an honest and uncompromising account of moments of awkwardness and silence in her research, and participation which seemingly does not live up to its promises. But she underlines the importance of accepting these moments as valid interventions, which led her to open up to forms of knowledge that were less abstracted and more embodied and situated. The messiness of participatory research is instructive and is itself shaped by spatial contexts and processes, a realisation which is more helpful for other researchers than textbook pretences of a 'gold standard' (Kesby et al 2005). Ellie Jupp's paper 'focuses on moments of failure and difficulties in order to open up, rather than close down, how we think about participation in social science research'. She also views participatory knowledges as performative and located within particular sets of social relations, times and places. Knowledge is made through research processes rather than there being a singular version of the world awaiting detection, and participatory research not only allows for, but embraces, multiple realities. Sceptical views of participation tend to construct it in much narrower terms; Demeritt (2005), for example, suggests that participatory geographies have an instrumentalism about them which parallels that of more traditional relationships between academics and policy-makers, and that participatory

geographers are engaged in the antithesis of blue skies theorising. Yet, as Ellie Jupp demonstrates, participatory research should be explicitly about the openness, emergence, surprise, tensions and irreconcilability that often make up the process of co-researching with non academics.

Fran Klodowsky's paper focuses on the socio-spatial contexts of participatory research and their importance for methodological choices and possibilities for participatory working, particularly in our collaborations with public bodies. With reference to two projects she has been involved in researching in Canada, one on homelessness and one on gender and diversity, she highlights the challenges of neoliberalism in shaping the spaces in which research choices and outcomes are made. Rhetoric about partnerships with community groups has increased in Canada's municipal governments as elsewhere, and yet the possibilities for genuinely democratic processes are often squeezed. Things played out very differently on the two projects, as a deeper model of participatory research was embraced in the gender project. Fran Klodowsky offers very insightful reflections on how to judge the role of participatory research in 'deliberalizing' space, a concern which occupies many researchers who work between community groups, public organisations and the academy. While both projects were successful in highlighting the concerns and experiences of marginalised groups, she suggests that both could also be viewed as playing to the double-edged neoliberalist agenda of regulation/inclusivity. Like Mike Kesby and Ellie Jupp, she argues strongly that participatory research must be understood as open and fluid, its progress shaped by social and political conditions, so that practice becomes 'not an abstract ideal but rather about the art of the possible – understood reflexively – in a variety of venues and spaces'.

Together, the three papers cover the richness of the elements of theory, practice and action in participatory research, each also emphasising their inseparability and co-construction. ??

Finally, the commentary from Caitlin Cahill – one whose own work is ...some nice words here...long term project with young women, co-analysis and theorising, personal and political transformations (refs). **A couple of lines here introducing her commentary when she's completed it. ?**

After two decades of participatory work in human geography, we suggest that no geographer can afford to ignore the questions and challenges it poses, just as none can afford a completely cavalier attitude to the question of who their research benefits (adapted from Parfitt, 2004:540). The challenge facing us now is to how best negotiate the inherent ambiguities and contradictions of participation within our practice, at the same time as opening up spaces for the dissemination of new insights and possibilities for transformative knowledge and action. Specifically, as participation gains institutional power, we need to consider what (following Williams, 2004) this power can be made to do. Geographers are in an ideal position to find out. As Mike Kesby concludes in his paper, 'if we are really convinced of the importance of space to social analysis we must find ways to make the complex tools of critical human geography accessible to ordinary people in and through participatory praxis so that they can identify the spatial embeddedness of powers affecting their lives [and] develop critical cartographies and alternative spatial representations as a resource for empowerment'.

Order of papers after introduction:

Mike Kesby

Eleanor Jupp

Fran Klodowsky

Caitlin Cahill

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Notes

¹ Sessions on participatory geographies have since been held at the Association of American Geographers annual meetings in Denver (2005) and Chicago (2006), the Royal Geographical Society/Institute of British Geographers annual conferences in

London (2005 and 2006), and the International Geographical Union conference in Brisbane (2006).

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